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ABSTRACT

This paper presents an experientially oriented approach to learning in preschool and describes a research project designed to: (1) develop a theoretically and scientifically based curriculum; (2) systematically describe what happens in the groups where this curriculum is applied; (3) evaluate children's development in preschool in regards to the content they work on; and (4) evaluate the initial experience with primary education for 50% of the children. Six preschool teachers in three day care groups and three part-time preschools were selected to participate in a project to develop the teachers' competence in applying the experientially oriented approach. Results from the first year of the study showed that a confrontation exists between the experientially oriented approach and the preschool teachers' views of knowledge and learning. In the remaining part of the research project, observations and evaluations of children in school will be used to test the assumption that the children's conceptions are more fundamental than their skills and knowledge. Content will focus on reading, writing, numbers, aspects of the natural and the man-made world, and children's understanding of their own learning. (Author/SH)

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Paper presented at the "Fifth Early Childhood Convention", Dunedin, New Zealand 8--12 September, 1991.

To develop the child´s understanding of the surrounding world.

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This presentation will be focused on a current research project aimed at developing a new approach to learning in the years around starting school. The project was begun in 1990 and will continue for another two years. The theoretical perspective, aims and methods will be presented, as well as a brief summary of my observations of the teacher´s work from the first year.

Background - educational perspectives

Looking at what is going on in preschool nationally and internationally, one can distinguish different approaches based on different theoretical views or assumptions about children´s learning and development. These disparate approaches also represent different goals and methods.

Firstly, we have the kind of preschool programme which focuses on the *child´s activity as such,* that is, the child´s play. In this case, the preschool is supposed to provide children with material to work with, and to give them experience which will be the basis for and content to utilize in play. The assumption is that there is a need in the child to work on their experiences. The psycho-analytical theory is seen behind this approach. The development of every child will emanate from its own experience.This means that the programme has to be totally *child-centred,* with no or very little intention to influence children´s learning. Consequently, the activities in preschool become unsystematic, and the goals are often presented in general terms such as "learning to co-operate", "to develop social skills" (how to behave), "develop creativity" and "communication skills", etc. To summarize, from the child´s experiences he or she is expected to devote him- or herself to being active and to manipulate with the concrete world. To follow this "natural child" is what preschool seems to be all about (Sylva et. al, 1980). To evaluate this kind of programme is almost impossible.

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A second approach in preschool is the view developed by *Fröbel,* in which the *child´s general skills* in terms of logical - mathematical thinking are looked upon as the long-term goal. In the Fröbelian view, divineness and logical - mathematical thinking are related. The child is viewed as progressing via general development stages, and as each sequence of development can be predicted, material can be provided supporting the development at a specific level. *Montessori* , with her view of "sensitive periods" which could be worked on with concrete material, also developed by her, is an example of this approach to learning (Montessori, 1917). *The High/scope programme,* based on the Piagetian general stages, is another example of this view. The High scope approach focuses not only on concrete work with materials; the theoretical view is also based on the notions claimed by Piaget as central to developing the child at each stage to finally reach a logical-mathematical thinking as the most advanced way of thinking. Developing general thinking skills is looked upon as the best basis for later learning in school. (Rye, et.al. 1987). Fuerstein (1987) has dealt with work on children´s general intellectual skills by teaching them technical skills. He claims that developing children´s technical skills not only makes them better learners in school but the method also helps to develop their intellegence in general. Shayer (1988) made a close replication of this kind of study, but showed that skills from one domain did not transfer to another. This is in line with most

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newer research in the field of learning, where many claim that learning is content - and context-dependent (see e.g. Hundeide, 1989; Marton, 1988; Greeno, 1988).

The third kind of preschool programme to be reviewed is the one focusing on *specific knowledge*. Here the child´s learning of the *subject matter* is placed at the centre. The assumption is that there is a specific body of knowledge, such as the alphabet, figures and other facts, that the child must be supplied with before being able to learn in school. The *teacher structures* exercises with a clear intention to teach children specific things. An excellent example of this is the huge number of "before school books" available on the market.

Memorization, repetition and exercises are key notions in this traditionally school-oriented approach. The view seems to lean on an idea that children become best equipped for school learning by doing similar things in preschool to the ones done later in school, but at an easier level. A lot of material formerly used in primary school is used in preschool nowadays (Elkind, 1988a).

This kind of preschool programme can be easily evaluated with traditional tests. For example, a child either knows or does not know the different letters, or is able to count to 20 etc. However, all evaluations made on the effects of preschool programmes show a similar trend, namely, that children who have been involved in the most school-like and teacher-structured activities are the ones who are the least successful in school (see e.g. Weikart, 1989; Osborn & Milbank, 1988; Gordon, 1987). Children involved in this approach to learning seem to be forced into a formal way of learning that they are yet not ready for.

Looking at what is going on in preschool all over the world today we can observe one line pointing towards "the natural child", one which we in preschool had better not interfere with. The other obvious line is towards exerting a systematic influence by concrete manipulation with materials or by transmitting abstract knowledge to children. The theories underlying some programmes are similar. For example, the Piagetian theory is used both to support the direction towards "the natural child" and the generally structured High/scope programme (Forman & Fosnot, 1982). This means that the view of child development is only one aspect underlying a programme, or maybe it is only used to inspire a programme. Sylva (1986) says that the content of the programme comes from other sources such as the values of the society and the teacher's professional experience.

The general trend in societies all over the world seems to be towards lowering the school age, which most often means putting younger children into formal teacher-structured learning situations. Elkind (1988b) talks about the harm that early instruction can make on motivational, intellectual and social aspects of the child´s life and later learning. He also claims that preschool children do not need to be taught learning skills, nor do they need to be taught specific contents from different disciplines. "The task of early childhood educators is to provide the material upon which children can employ their skills. They also need to give children the labels to go with the discriminations they are making"(op.cit. p. 107).

In this paper I will try to give an alternative approach to learning in preschool. *What is it we ought to provide children with, and what kind of labels are basic to learning at these ages?*

An experientially oriented approach

In the Russian activity theory it is presupposed that children´s thoughts are framed in relation to the activities they take part in, in their society (Davydov, 1988). This means that *thoughts are looked upon as content - and context-dependent* (Säljö, 1989).

Hundeide (1989) calls this phenomenon developing a structure of relevance in the child´s thinking. This means that the child perceives situations, tasks, problems, people, objects, etc., according to experiences which are relevant in relation to the child´s life-world. The child's actions are determined by what appears as meaningful to it. If you take the children's perspective and see how they experience the world and relate themselves to different phenomena, it becomes obvious that you can not separate the children´s cognitive capacity from the world around them, that is, from the content and context the child is a part of (Pramling, 1989). Children´s personal history is created by the purpose experienced. It is the child´s experienced reality that forms their world of thoughts (Merleau - Ponty, 1962). Within the field of phenomenology, the notion "lived-world" is used for the children´s concrete experiences as these appear in their consciousness. What characterizes this notion is that there does not exist an internal subjective reality distingnished from an external objective reality. There is just one reality, an experienced and lived reality. And the reality is subjective and objective at the same time.

How children see, conceptualize, experience or relate themselves to the world around them is a question of their consciousness.In the field of phenomenology, conciousness is seen to be expressed by intentionality.

Josefine (17 months) is sitting on the floor with a specific kind of children´s book in one hand. With the other hand she is poking around in a pile of books. She finds another book of the same sort as the one she is holding in her hand. She sits for a while looking from one book to the other, totally occupied. After a while she puts both of the books on the floor, stands up and places a foot on each book, smiling.

What is it that Josefine is experiencing? She cannot articulate that the books make a pair. She does not have the notion of similarity, nor she is able to say the word "two". It is obvious, though, that she experiences that these two books are similar, a pair, two. She herself has got something in common with the two books, a pair of legs, and she demonstrates this.

This is an example of how the child´s experience is more fundamental than knowledge and skills. Many children develop their awareness of different aspects of the surrounding world by themselves, other do not. But since the assumption of this approach to preschool education is: *how different aspects of the world around them are experienced is more basic than skills and knowledge, this ought to be the goal to work for in preschool.* To raise the level of the child´s awareness means to make the world more transparent, to influence the senses through which it experiences the world.

To take the child's perspective means focusing on the whole child in its environment . The emotions are subsequently undistinguishable from the child´s thoughts. The most fundamental principle in the field of child development is that a child is born with a capacity to experience the world around him, and with a capacity to adapt to these experiences (Hundeide, 1989).

Young children learn about objects by looking, touching, pulling, throwing, hammering, smelling, tasting, feeling etc. In other words, they experience the objects from all possible views,with all senses. When the older preschool children are on their way *to dig into the world of ideas,* they ought to get the same opportunity *to turn these ideas back and forth and to experience the variation in the ways of thinking.*

Let us look at an example of how 5- and 6-year-olds experienced a phenomenon such as growing and feeling well. The question put to the children was: What do children need to grow and feel good? In the group of 10 children one could see that the children focused on a variety of aspects.

1. Material things, such as somewhere to live, a bed, clothes, things to play with etc.

2. Nature, such as food or air to breath. Someone also talked about nature as a source of experiences, that is, "one needs to smell the flowers to get a feeling of well-being".

3. People, the reason for them varied. Some children spoke about parents as someone who has to see to *the child´s food and clothes*. Other children saw parents as somebody to have an *emotional relationship with,* expressed as "someone to hug and get consolation from". Finally, someone expressed the need for parents as a guide in everyday life. This child told the interviewer: If I as a child find berries in the forest, and my dad knew that these particular berries were poisonous, he could warn me and prevent me from tasting them" (Pramling 1991b).

What a child needs in order to grow and feel well is a question concerning the child´s understanding of himself and others as physical, psychological and emotional human beings. Nevertheless, it is a cognitive question, that is, a question about a content which can be the focus of children´s attention on which children can reflect in many different settings to raise their level of consciousness.

Children´s different ideas of what one needs in order to grow and feel good could be visible to children via drawings, drama, discussions, symbols etc.

The approach adopted in my present research project is based on earlier research. In Pramling (1989), children´s conception of their own learning have been developed while they worked on developing their understanding of different phenomena in the space of one school year. They partly worked in line with the educational principles which will now be further expanded in this project. In a learning task at the end of the year, it was shown that children who had been involved in the experientially oriented approach, in comparison with children who had been involved in more traditionally designed programmes, *became better learners*. To become a better learner means to understand a phenomenon at a qualitatively higher level - to see other kinds of connections. Within that project they also worked on a specific content "The shop" (Pramling, 1991a), where children´s understanding of specific economic aspects was developed with guidance from an earlier study where children´s thinking about the content was described (Pramling, 1986). To sum up, the above study showed that children who have participated in the experientially oriented approach for one year developed not only cognitively in their capacity to understand meanings, but also metacognitively by developing their conception of their own learning (Pramling, 1989). The experientially oriented approach has a "<u>what</u> aspect", a "<u>how</u> aspect" and a metacognitive aspect, which will be further developed later in this paper.

The purpose of the research project

The purpose of the project is to:

1) Develop a theoretically and scientifically based "curriculum", since theoretically based ideas are applied in practice.

2) To systematically describe what happens in the groups when these ideas are applied.

3) To work out an internal evaluation, that means, evaluate children´s development in preschool in relation to the content they work on.

4) To evaluate the meeting with primary school for 50% of the children.

The design and method of the project

During the first year six preschool-teachers have been involved. They work in three different day-care groups and three part-time preschools located in different social areas of a large city. All six teachers are very experienced and have shown a great deal of enthusiasm for participating in the project.

The teachers have met once a month with the project leader. At every meeting a specific content has been introduced, such as, for example, children´s development of number conception, ideas about reading and writing, children´s thinking about aspects of natural or social science, ideas about learning, interviewing children, etc. Research results referring to different contents in relation to children´s thinking have thus been presented to the teachers. They have then gone back to their groups of children and tried out the information they have received. They also had to study relevant literature and articles during the year. Besides the theoretical discussions with the whole group, the project leader supervised every teacher individually in her practical work with the children.

The goal of the first year of the project has been to develop the teacher´s competence in applying the experientially oriented approach to their work with the children. Another attempt has been to write a "curriculum of ideas" to work on during the next year when the real work with the children will start.

The second year of the project will begin with interviews with all the 5 and 6-year-olds in the six different groups. It will be a Piagetian clinical interview, where the focus is on grasping the child´s way of thinking (Piaget, 1975). The content of the interview will relate to the content planned to be worked on during the next coming year (or years).

Narrative observations will be made in the six groups throughout the year, focusing on the specific content worked at. Children will be interviewed again at the end of the school year, with similar questions to those at the beginning.

The third year will continue like the second one with observations in preschool on the children that are 5 when we begin and in school on the children that are 6 when we begin. (In Sweden most children begin school at 7, but the age at which they begin will soon be lowered to 6 years of age. Pramling 1991b).

The evaluation in school will also be made by teacher ratings and traditional tests at the end of the year to examine children´s knowledge and skills in the ordinary subjects. The reason for making this evaluation is to test the assumption that children´s conceptions, ideas or how they experience things are more fundamental than skills and knowledge. If this assumption is right, these children ought to be better learners in general in school.

All children will be interviewed a third time at the end of the project period, in order to record children´s understanding of the different phenomena worked with.

The base group of six teachers co-operate in their groups with other preschool teachers or nursery-nurses. Getting these people involved in the project is a concern of each and everyone of the six teachers. This is done on purpose, as we believe that their own thoughts or understanding about different aspects of the project become obvious to themselves when they have to explain it to others.

The content to work on among the children

The "curriculum" focuses on phenomena in the surrounding world, and is partly oriented towards the subject matter in school. But I want to strongly emphazise that it is <u>not</u> identical with the school curriculum, since in school it is a question of children learning,

for instance, the skills of reading, writing and counting. *My approach focuses on providing children with conditions - to develop the basis for learning.*

Within the field of *reading and writing* this alternative involves making the children aware of these skills - to make them visible to children as part of their own experience. What are the features of these skills? How could the relation between verbal and written language become visible? How could it be visible to children that the flow of speach is divided into words? What is the function of being able to read and write? What is a symbol?

Support for this kind of content is found in Dahlgren and Olsson´s (1985) study of how children conceptualize reading. There it is shown that children who did not have an idea about why one ought to read and how to go about it, developed learning problems in school. On the other hand, all children who had the idea that reading would enable them to read books, messages etc, rapidly learned to read in primary school. Francis (1982). using another another research approach, has made similar findings, i.e. that children's ideas about the school activities have a strong bearing on what they actually learn there.

Another content is the *experience of numbers,* which is not the same as performing counting procedures - learning the operations. The alternative view in this approach is that arithmetic skills are developed by getting children to grasp the meaning of numbers, and their meaning in different aspects of counting.

Neuman (1987) has shown in her research into the subject of arithmetic that when a child in school ran into difficulties when tyring to solve arithmetic problems, the reason was not ta lack of counting procedures, but that the child had not developed a basic understanding of numbers or the counting activity. Neuman claims that children who have not conceptualized numbers as a pattern, but have to count every number to solve a problem, will run into difficulties when they have to work with higher numbers (over 10) later on.To be able to do this, children must be able to imagine numbers.According to Neuman, learning to imagine numbers can be done by getting children to conceptualize patterns, for example,"finger-pictures". A similar view of basic arithmetic can be found in the Japanese preschool, where arithmetic is not seen as a question of letting children manipulate and exercise with symbols, but as imagining arithmetic problems in dialogue with the children (Gordon, 1987).

Doverborg (1987) studied two preschools with regard to children´s development of arithmetical skills. One of them worked in school-oriented fashion and trained different arithmetic aspects during lessons. The other one utilized everyday life by making these aspects visible when laying the table, when they did needlework, baked, cooked etc. The evaluation showed that children who had been involved in the latter approach to arithmetic were better at solving arithmetic tasks than children who had worked in a way similar to that in school.

A third content is to *understand aspects of the natural world,* which could involve making children aware of the ecological cycle (Pramling, 1989), growth, living and dead things (Stepans, 1985), the change of seasons, changes in nature (Maurice, Staeheli & Montangero, 1990) time (Dionnet & Montangero, 1990), aspects of technical science (Driver, 1982; Lybeck, 1981), etc.Within every area it is not the facts children should be given information about, but the focus is on developing their thoughts.

A fourth content is to understand aspects of *the man-made world,* like the surroundings in a perspective of *time* (history) and *space* (cultural and geographical aspects). This could mean focusing on phenomena in society such as the shop (Pramling, 1991 a), professions (Furth, 1980), social interactions (Damond, 1977), such as co-operation (Klerfelt, 1991), artwork (Gutavsson, 1991) etc.

The fifth and last area of content is children's *understanding of their own learning,* that is, to make them aware of both*what* they learn and *how* this learning comes about (Pramling, 1983). Earlier studies have shown that the child´s metacognive level is of great importance to learning (Pramling, 1987; Pramling, 1988; Brown & Reeve, 1985).

The experientially oriented approach in practice

There is no simple method to adopt, but *teacher´s* awareness should be directed towards: 1) *getting children to talk and reflect in concrete situations,* which means to be able to put other kinds of questions than teachers normally do, 2) *becoming informed about existing research on and descriptions of children´s thinking* (see the section above), and 3) developing their own *methodological knowledge* in areas such as methods of interviewing (Doverborg & Pramling, 1985), principles for planning themes etc.

The first step when planning a content is to decide what *the goal* of the theme is in terms of what possible understanding to work towards with children. What is the "figure to make visible" and what ought to be the background, using the notions of gestalt psychology. What kind of relationship can a child in the age-group in question grasp? One goal , for instance, could be to understand the relation between bees and nature within a theme of bees. The second step should be to find out whether the children have already achieved an understanding of this particular relationship previously. To learn about children´s thinking could be done by means of interviews, drawings, drama, problem-solving, playing and so on. When, in an earlier study, interviews were carried out about the relationship between bees and nature, it was shown that all the children knew that there was a relationship, but they all took the point of view of the bee (Doverborg & Pramling, 1988). This means that they knew that the bees needed nature, while none had the idea that nature needed the bees, for example, for pollination. When the teacher has completed this interview, she will know what there is left to work on from her first goal. The third step in the planning process is to create concrete situations around which children will be able to think and reflect. Finally, it is necessary to document all activities constantly so that the children´s learning, i.e.the thoughts developed by the children after being involved in a specific theme, may be evaluated at a later date.

The three aspects described above are skills which the teacher must have, in combination with an awareness of how and what she wants the children to develop. Apart from the teacher´s knowledge as described above, and taking the *children´s* point of view, the methodology of this approach is based on: 1) *children learn from one another,* which means that the differences between children are held in focus instead of their similarities, 2) the teacher must *expose the ways in which the children are thinking and use these as a content in education,* and 3) children should be involved in activities which directly influence them (material, situations, play, etc.).

To thematize different contents means not only introducing a specific content, as described earlier,but also being able to utilize everyday situations to give children the opportunity to be aware of different phenomena in the world around them.

Reflections on the first year´s project

The first year of this ongoing project has been focused on developing the teacher´s competence. From the start of the project there were seven teachers. The one who dropped out of the project after a few months, understood that she would not be able to work with this approach within the firmly structured programme they had at her day-care centre. Since she felt that it would be such hard work to influence her colleagues to change, she left the group.

During my supervision of the groups I have seen that the teachers feel very happy to participate, and they all do what´s expected of them regarding the tasks and reading the set texts. They all feel that they have matured during the year, and I have also noticed their struggle, much due to the fact that this approach partly diverges from the traditional "preschool-teacher´s soul", and what she has taken for granted earlier. It seems like there is a resistance towards breaking into the child´s world, that is, towards touching what is normally conceptualized as "the childs own creativity". To problematize gives the teacher a fear of not being able to give a correct answer herself if the child returns the question. Another reason could be that she has an idea that a question put to a child should always be easy to answer - a child should never experience failure. In a way, the answer seems more important than the question from the preschool teacher´s point of view, whereas in *this research approach the flow of ideas is more important than the answers*.

Other studies have indicated that there are a very small number of challenging activities in the preschool setting both in Britain (Sylva, Roy & Painter, 1980) and in Sweden (Kärrby, 1987). It is therefore hardly surprising that, during the first year of this project, there was an obvious confrontation between the experientially oreinted approach and the preschool teachers' earlier views of knowledge and learning. At the same time, they felt strongly that they could retain most of the preschool methods and practice they used previously.

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